

# Farm Labor Shortage Menace to Nation



POTATO DIGGERS TYPE OF FARM MACHINERY THAT REDUCES NUMBER OF HANDS BUT CALLS FOR SKILLED LABOR

By ROBERT G. SKERRETT.

"OUR allies are depending upon the United States." In these words David Lubin, the American representative in the International Institute of Agriculture at Rome, recently summed up the burden of food production which stress of war has placed upon the shoulders of the farmers of the United States.

Heavy as this obligation would be in normal times, the task has become much more difficult by reason of our entry into the conflict. It will not suffice that we merely restrain appetites that have developed during long periods of plenty and prosperity. Self-denial will undoubtedly contribute to an exportable surplus, but notable hardships may be imposed upon us in order that we may contribute vital foodstuffs to our allies in the course of the current year.

The crying need, if we are to have sufficient food for ourselves and a liberal volume to send abroad, is a proper supply of capable farm labor. Many things have been promised by the constituted authorities, but relatively little has been achieved in meeting the situation squarely and furnishing a really practical solution of this fundamental problem.

The up to date tiller of the soil is no doubt patriotic, but he has suffered through the reaction of his prompt response to the appeal made to him early last year to increase his cultivated acres. He is a business man and his readiness to help has hurt him, as his annual balance sheets have been crowded by many circumstances and his books bear indisputable evidence of losses where he counted upon reasonable gains. The prices for fertilizers, seeds, farm tools and feeds have mounted to more or less prohibitive heights and then, by way of climax, he has suddenly realized that even higher wages could not recruit for him the necessary qualified labor.

There is a widespread disposition to boast of American ingenuity in evolving labor saving farm machinery. It is true that from 1855 to 1894 the human effort required to produce one bushel of corn declined on an average from four hours and a half to a span of but forty-one minutes. And in the matter of producing wheat from 1830 to 1894 the manual labor needed diminished from three hours and three minutes to ten minutes a bushel of marketable grain.

But while cleverly devised apparatus has made this time saving possible and has enabled one man to do in a day what formerly many men could not accomplish between sunrise and sunset, still these mechanical aids have emphasized the need of greater skill on the part of the smaller agricultural army. Untrained boys, women and children unused to farm work and the unaccustomed city dwellers are not going to meet the difficulty. The trained farmhand is the man that is now needed more than ever.

The qualified mechanic in the munition plant is no more indispensable there than the experienced agricultural laborer is on the farm. Here in Greater New York

people are somewhat prone to look upon the remote States as the sources of their daily food, quite forgetting how much they have to depend upon the nearby fields. Yet the conditions as they have developed within New York State may well be cited to make clear the circumstances that are fairly common the country over.

Opinions of Paul T. Brady upon agricultural topics have already been printed in THE SUNDAY SUN. His position is unimpaired and adds especial force to what he has to say. As a conspicuous figure in one of America's largest electrical manufacturing companies, a captain of industry, he has gone in for farming as a side issue, bent upon showing that business methods applied to the land will yield compensating returns and make of agriculture a balanced, dependable industry. He has applied to his hundreds of acres in Dutchess county the same administrative acumen which has placed him where he is in commercial life.

In answer to an inquiry as to his opinion regarding the prospects for an ample supply of labor on the farms and the probable production of foodstuffs during 1918 Mr. Brady said:

"When President Wilson made his appeal in the spring of 1917 for the planting of everything susceptible of producing foodstuffs for the United States and for the world at large if necessary none were more loyal, none made greater efforts than the owners of farms throughout the United States. Many men who had previously planted but a small acreage did their utmost to increase their fields, and as a result our potato crop for 1917 exceeded by more than 100,000,000 bushels that of any other year.

"Then labor on the farms was substantially undisturbed, but later came the call for volunteers for the army and the navy and finally the military draft. Agricultural workers began to leave the farms by reason of the lure of the higher wages of the munition factories and the patriotic bids of the fighting services.

"The consequence of this tide of trained men moving away from the farms told hurtfully before the close of agricultural activity. Many farmers who had planted crops with the expectation of thoroughly cultivating them, harvesting and storing what might be necessary and selling the surplus found themselves towards the latter part of the season without the needful help to finish the cultivation, or, if this were done, they were afterward without aid at the time of harvest. It was only logical that large quantities of foodstuffs were left ungathered and spoiled where they stood.

"My own experience has been much like that of many others in trying to respond to the Presidential appeal. Last spring I decided to use every resource to produce as large a crop as possible of foodstuffs, both to feed a big herd of milk producing cattle and to raise young stock to sell in the markets of the world.

"I need from thirty to forty men all the time, as I have nearly 400 head of milk cows, young stock, &c., and the growing of feed for these cattle as well as the care of them demands a good force of farm laborers. It was plain to me last spring that I was likely to run short of workers and accordingly I secured a number of

Brown University students and some high school boys, in all about twelve.

"Most of these young men were without any knowledge of farm operations. Some of the high school boys were worse than useless; they were a nuisance and had to be got rid of. The university men, being acquainted with one another, worked together and did very well, but even so they had to be under the eye and direction of experienced men nearly all the time.

"Many other farmers are in the same fix, although not all of those I know in my neighborhood are as large employers of labor as I am. I can recall many instances in which farmers in Dutchess county have sold their entire herds of cattle because they could not maintain them, and during the coming season they are going to get along with only a small patch of potatoes, a few vegetables, &c., to meet their own domestic requirements.

"I am not an advocate of price fixing on farm produce or, so far as that is concerned, on any other merchandise, but it would seem to me, inasmuch as the Government has started along this line of regulation, that it might be well to go further in the name of expediency. Therefore, I recommend that the price be fixed on the 1918 potato crop.

"A short while ago I seriously considered selling every head of cattle that I owned and letting the land lie idle until more help could be secured. Upon second thought I decided not to do this for economic reasons.

"In my establishment I expect to produce this year 2,000,000 pounds of milk from my dairy herd, a large number of young stock, approximately 200, and other products. It would be something of a public calamity to dissipate these resources. Let me make this plainer.

"The 2,000,000 pounds of milk I count upon getting is the equivalent in food value of 1,000,000 pounds of beef. To obtain 1,000,000 pounds of beef would take 2,000 head of cattle dressing 500 pounds apiece after a considerable period of feeding and fattening.

"But when 2,000 head of cattle have been killed and turned into beef their vital course comes to an end. The dairy herd, on the other hand, even while yielding 2,000,000 pounds of milk and giving birth to from 200 to 300 calves, still remains intact and capable of further production and reproduction.

"Bearing these facts in mind, I am going to try to keep things running, but the outlook is not encouraging. During the past week the man in charge of my creamery was drafted and I shall find it very hard indeed to replace him. He has been examined and passed and will be mustered into the army.

"Another one of my mainstays on the farm, a son, has been called for the aviation service. I do not know how many more will be drawn from me, but unhappily most of the help that still remains is not of a class that would prove of substantial value either to our military ranks or to the army of industrial workers.

"Many uninformed writers tell us to 'utilize the boys; utilize the men from the offices and the cities; put the women to work in the fields.' Let me say that few of these boys are fit to be on a farm and given their heads.

"An inexperienced man from office life can learn in the time set but little of the ways of working a farm; but little of the grown, not made in a few weeks. An untrained farmhand with a pair of horses and a riding cultivator going into a field of corn, potatoes, &c., can do more damage in a day than his services are worth in an entire season.

"As for women, the native born are not educated for farm work. They might be forced to learn in the course of a number of years, but they are not as constitutionally rugged as their foreign sisters: they were not brought up to labor in the fields. I am speaking now of the women from the cities, from the factories, &c. Many farmers' wives and daughters can and do perform a certain amount of work, but this contributes little to the total volume of the labor required in our agricultural industry.

"If a supply of labor is not furnished to the farms the world faces a serious condition for the year 1918-19, one more serious than my words convey. Where, then, is this farm labor to come from?

"Many people have advocated the introduction of Chinese. If the war is to continue and a shortage of workers is going to last, why wouldn't it be a good plan to import 100,000 or 200,000 Chinese after the manner set by France and let them stay in this country for three or five years?

"The Chinaman, as Californians tell us, is a reliable, industrious and very capable farmhand, probably because his country has been preeminently an agricultural nation for centuries. If we do not want them any longer than the time set, then they can be shipped back to China under terms that are attractive and generous, such as the French have proposed.

"This really seems at first blush to be the likeliest solution of our pressing need of tillers of the soil. We must not forget that it will be a long, long time before we will again have laboring on our railroads, working in our construction gangs at various undertakings, the thousands of Italians upon whom we relied down to 1914.

"In Texas probably the Mexicans can be used upon the farms, but that State is only one of many calling for aid, and the Mexican laborer is not sufficiently adaptable to permit his introduction throughout the country. The Chinese, on the other hand, will fit in anywhere, and no race of people is so well qualified or so faithful and efficient in agricultural pursuits. We have labor on our farms, and unless we have this help promptly and in ample numbers the workers in our factories, the people in our cities and our soldiers at the front will go hungry.

"If the introduction of the Oriental is objected to, then why not enlist our trained farm labor in the National Guard, retain them in this country for home defense and hold them where they can be drawn on promptly for agricultural purposes, and yet be within easy reach if they are required for domestic military service? In this way the skilled farmhand is a finished workman, and if economic considerations are to be heeded he should be used where he can contribute most to the national welfare."